

A 1999 Survey of NIPF Landowners in Washington State: Objectives and Issues

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Abstract

Washington's NIPF forested holdings total 3.1 million acres or 19.3% of the state's total commercial timberland and accounted for 29.3% of the timber harvested in the state on a volume basis in 1998. These NIPF lands also provide numerous non-monetary benefits to the owners and to the state as a whole. This paper provides an overview of a 1999 survey of non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners in Washington State. Results are based on 872 completed questionnaires. Respondents averaged 57 years of age and had owned their land for an average of 23 years. Median ownership size for all respondents was 40 acres. Nearly half of the respondents had a permanent residence of some type on their property and 20% of the forest holdings were held as part of a farm or ranch.

Washington's owners are more affluent, more computer literate and more urbanized than ever before. Owners also face a variety of ownership problems, with over half reporting trespassing and one third with illegal dumping. Owners expressed a variety of ownership objectives. Respondents also exhibited a very strong land ethic, with approximately three fourths of the owners somewhat to strongly agreeing with a variety of statements related to this attribute. Responses also reflected the struggle to balance environmental concerns while producing products and income. Owners responding also exhibited strong reservations about the use of prescribed fire on their lands as a management tool, while at the same time the majority indicated that prescribed fire could be a useful tool.

Over fifty percent of the owners responding indicated that they had sold timber in the past. Approximately, one fourth of the respondents plan to sell timber over the next five years. If past trends continue, it appears

likely that roughly two thirds of future sales will occur without the benefit of advice or assistance from a professional forester.

Introduction

Washington's non-industrial private forestland (NIPF) landowners have historically received relatively little attention when compared to their eastern counterparts (Blatner et al. 1991). However, with the dramatic reductions in federal timber harvests in the Pacific Northwest during the 1990s and the rise of numerous environmental and development issues in the state, Washington's NIPF landowners have become the subject of considerable interest by policy analysts, forest industry and various environmental groups.

Washington's NIPF forested holdings total 3.1 million acres or 19.3% of the state's total of commercial forestland (MacLean et al. 1992, McKay et al. 1995). Owners harvested nearly 1.2 billion board feet (Scribner scale) in 1998, accounting for 29.3% of the timber harvest in the state on a volume basis (Larsen 2000). However, the growing interest in Washington's NIPF lands goes far beyond their role in providing raw material for the state's solid wood and pulp paper products sectors. NIPF lands provide critically important environmental and recreational values to their owners and to the people of the state. These lands are also often highly sought after by developers for a wide variety of purposes and individuals seeking more a rural life style.

This paper provides an overview of a recently completed survey of NIPF landowners in Washington State. The survey was conducted in an effort to develop an updated profile of NIPF landowners in the state and their views on a wide range of environmental and other

issues. The results presented here are for the state as a whole. More detailed breakdowns will be published in subsequent papers.

Survey Methods

During 1998 and early 1999 all of the forested counties in Washington State were contacted in an effort to a listing of NIPF landowners and addresses for each county, since no statewide computerized list of NIPF landowners exists. A random sample of forestland owners was drawn for each county based on the proportion of NIPF lands in each county. A total of 800 names for western and 800 names for eastern Washington were drawn. In addition, an over-sample of 400 Washington Farm Forestry Association (WFFA) member names was drawn for the entire state.

The survey instrument was based on an extensive review of previously used survey instruments as well as new questions developed specifically for this study. In particular, permission was obtained to use a series of questions from a recently published study of Massachusetts NIPF owner attitudes concerning ecosystem management (Richenbach et al. 1998). Inclusion of these questions provided a block of questions designed to assess owner attitudes towards the environment and will provide direct comparisons with landowners in Massachusetts in future work.

The survey was conducted during early fall 1999 by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC). Dillman's total design method was used in implementing the survey with a three-wave mailing (Dillman 2000). An overall completion rate of 49.29% was achieved. The completion rate for the general NIPF survey sample was slightly lower at 44.61%, while the rate for the WFFA over-sample was 67.69%. The much higher response rate for the WFFA over-sample is at least partially attributable to promotion efforts by the WFFA.

SESRC compiled the resulting data and provided extensive error checking. The authors completed subsequent data analysis. The results presented here represent a weighted average of the responses for the state as a whole. This approach allows for the inclusion of the data from the WFFA over-sample by weighting it in proportion to the overall NIPF landowner population. The weighting factor was determined based on the number of WFFA members occurring on sample lists for eastern and western Washington.

Results

Respondent Profile

Individuals responding to the survey mirrored those of the previous statewide study of Washington NIPF landowners (Blatner et al. 1991) in many respects. Respondents averaged 57 years of age and had owned land for an average of 23 years. Over 93% were Caucasian and 85% indicated that the principal decision-maker was male. Fifty nine percent indicated that they had completed at least one college degree.

A few notable differences were also identified. Slightly more than half of the owners surveyed had an annual income in excess of \$50,000 per year. This suggests that landowners are somewhat better financially even after adjusting for inflation than they were in 1987. Landowners are also somewhat more urbanized than they were in the most recent prior study of owners in the state, with approximately half of the respondents living in a city with 5,000 or more people (Blatner 2000).

Median ownership for all respondents was 40 acres, while the mean holding size was 115 acres. Almost 90% of the respondents' lands were held as individual ownership, and nearly half had a permanent residence of some type on the property. Twenty percent of the forested holdings were held as part of a farm or ranch. Public access was allowed on 51% of the holdings and 27% had a fish-bearing stream. Fifty eight percent of the owners expressed a desire to keep the land in the family in the future.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions about computer ownership and use. Fifty one percent of those responding indicated that they used a computer at work, while an even higher percentage (58%) used a computer at home. Three fourths of those individuals who indicated using a computer at home or at work communicated via email and 70% used the World Wide Web to do research and obtain information. Of those who did not currently use a computer, 21% indicated that they planned to buy a computer sometime in the next three years.

Respondents were also asked to rate a wide of land ownership objectives using a four point Likert scale ranging from very important to very unimportant without the option of a "no opinion" midpoint. At least eighty five percent of the respondents rated each of the following reasons for land ownership as somewhat to very important, "attachment to land," "legacy for children,"

“satisfaction from owning land,” “privacy” and “scenic beauty.” Nearly half the respondents also indicated that income from the sale of timber was somewhat to very important ownership objective. One third of the respondents indicated the following ownership objectives were somewhat to very important: “a place to hunt and fish,” “a place to ride ATVs,” “eventual commercial development,” “access to nearby recreation,” and “income from future sale of the land.”

Beliefs and Attitudes

Drawing on the work of Richenbach et al. (1998), we asked those surveyed to respond to a series of questions concerning their feelings and attitudes about “their land and community.” In the next block of questions we asked them a related set of questions their feelings and attitudes about “forest and woodlands in general.” The following sections highlight some of the more significant findings.

Your Land and Your Community

Seventy percent or more of the respondents believed strongly to very strongly that it was important to “balance their needs with those of the land” and that “their land was part of a much larger natural system.” Similarly, 70% or more of the respondents believed strongly to very strongly that they “needed to provide for the future,” that “their actions were important in the long run” and that “their neighbors’ actions directly affected them and their land.” An even larger percentage of respondents expressed a need “to leave the land at least as good as they found it.”

Interestingly, even though it was obvious from the respondents’ answers that they held strong environmental values, not all of the questions posed yielded such strongly one-sided responses. When owners were asked if the “land must provide a return to cover the expenses associated with ownership,”—39% somewhat to strongly agreed, while 41% somewhat to strongly disagreed. Similarly, when owners were asked to respond to the statement “I would be pleased if a rare or threatened species was found on my land”—36% somewhat to strongly agreed, while 41% somewhat to strongly disagreed. In the each case the remainder of responses were either “neutral” or “no opinion”.

Forests and Woodlands in General

Respondents expressed a strong environmental ethic with respect to forests and woodlands in general. Over 70% of respondents believed “individual species were important,” “wetlands were of benefit to others,” and that “society has a responsibility to provide for future

generations.” Eighty percent of respondents also indicated that “resource decisions should not be based solely on economics.”

Issues Faced by NIPF Owners

Respondents were asked to indicate what issues/problems they faced as forestland owners. Trespassing was the most frequently cited issue with 53% of the respondents indicating a problem of this type. Illegal dumping, vandalism and poaching were commonly cited with 33%, 29% and 22% of those responding citing these problems, respectively.

Fire and Its Role

Surveyed owners were also presented with a series of questions concerning wildfire and fire protection. Only 4% of the respondents indicated having had a substantial wildfire on their lands over the past 10 years. The majority of respondents believed that fire protection was adequate.

Nearly three fourths felt fire played a major role in the development the region’s forest. However, we received a mixed response to a question concerning whether or not managers have practiced too much fire exclusion in Pacific Northwest forests. Forty one percent somewhat to strongly agreed with this statement, while 29% somewhat to strong disagreed. Twenty nine percent had no opinion.

With respect to the use of prescribed fire as a management tool, 55% indicated they were somewhat to very familiar with it. In addition, 63% somewhat to strongly agreed that it was a useful management tool. However, only 10% somewhat to strongly agreed with a statement indicating that they planned to use prescribed fire on their lands in the next 10 years. Sixty two percent somewhat to strongly disagreed with this statement and 28% were unsure. These results strongly suggest that NIFP landowners have significant reservations about the use of fire in forest management on their lands.

Timber Harvest Behavior

Owners’ surveyed were also asked a series of questions concerning their timber sale behavior. Fifty three percent of the respondents indicated that they had sold timber at least once during their tenure of ownership. Twenty one percent of those who had sold timber from their lands indicated they had sold timber earlier than expected due to concerns over changing harvest regulations. Owners reporting having sold timber were also asked to indicate the year of their most recent timber sale. Eighty three percent of the owners’ most recent timber sales occurred in the years 1990 through 1999, a

period of dramatically increasing prices as well as increasing regulation.

Twenty four percent of all respondents indicated that they planned to sell timber within next five years, while an additional 28% indicated that a timber sale was possible at some future date. Only 37% of those having sold timber sought advice from a consulting or public agency forester. Thirty five percent of the respondents reported relying on the advice of the loggers.

Summary and Conclusions

The results of the survey presented here suggest several important conclusions. Washington's owners are more affluent, more computer literate and more urbanized than ever before. Owners also face a variety of land ownership problems, with over half reporting problems with illegal trespass and one third with illegal dumping. Owners expressed a variety of ownership objectives. Various non-monetary benefits including the satisfaction from owning land, providing wildlife habitat and privacy were somewhat to very important to a large proportion of owners. Nearly half the respondents also rated income from the sale of timber as somewhat to very important.

Respondents exhibited a strong land ethic, with approximately three fourths of the owners somewhat to strong agreeing with a variety of statements relating to this attribute. They also tended to view their lands as part of larger system. Conversely, responses also reflected the struggle to balance environmental concerns with the costs of ownership. This point was reflected in a direct question concerning monetary issues and indirectly through a question concerning the desirability of finding a "threatened or endangered species" on their property. Owners responding to the survey also exhibited strong reservations about the use of prescribed fires on their lands as a management tool, while at the same time the majority indicated that prescribed fire could be a useful tool.

Over fifty percent of the owners responding indicated that they had sold timber in the past. Based on the survey results, approximately one fourth of the respondents plan to sell timber over the next five years. If past trends continue, it appears likely that roughly two thirds of these sales will occur without the assistance of a professional forester. These results add further support to the idea that while respondents exhibited strong environmental values, income from their lands was still important. It also points to the need for increased professional assistance in designing management plans, which are consistent with landowner management objectives – both monetary and non-monetary.

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